FTR WEEKEND
SATURDAY | 28TH AUGUST 2021

HOW TO DECODE THE DISINFORMATION ARCHITECTURE OF THE WORLD'S ANTI-DEMOCRATIC REGIMES

BOOK EXCERPTS

Democracy is under threat not just from cronyism and elite monopoly over power, but also from a degrading of processes and subversion of fact-based politics. This week's special focuses on the phenomenon of weaponising information at a time of its abundance. Hope you will find this insightful

Click-a-wave for a fee

'P' from the Philippines began his online career at the age of fifteen, creating an anonymous page that encouraged people to speak about their romantic experiences. 'Tell me about your worst break-up,' he would ask. 'What was your hottest date?' While still at school he created new groups, each one with a different profile: one dedicated to joy, for example, another to mental strength. He was only sixteen when he began to be approached by companies, who would ask him to drop in some mention of their products. He honed his technique.

For a week, he would get a community to talk about 'love', for example, who they cared about the most. Then, he would move the conversation to fear for your loved ones, the fear of losing someone. Then he would slide in a product: take this medicine and it will help extend the lives of loved ones.

He claims that by the age of twenty, he had fifteen million followers across all the platforms. After advertising, his next challenge was politics. At that point, political PR was all about getting journalists to write what you wanted. What if you could shape the whole conversation through social media?

P pitched his approach to several parties, but the only candidate who would take P on was Rodrigo Duterte, an outsider who looked to social media as a new route to victory. One of Duterte's main selling points as a candidate was busting drug crime. He even boasted of driving around on a motorcycle and shooting drug dealers while he was mayor of Davao City, in the country's south.

First, P created a series of Facebook groups in different cities. They were innocuous enough, just discussion boards of what was on in town. The trick was to put them in the local dialect. After six months, each group had in the region of 100,000 members. Then the group admins would start posting one local crime story per day, every day, to coincide with peak Internet traffic. The crime stories were real enough, but P's people would write comments that connected the crime to drugs: 'They say the killer was a drug dealer,' or 'This one was a victim of a pusher.' After a month they dropped in two stories per day; a month later, three per day. Drug crime became a hot topic, and Duterte drew ahead in the polls."

Analysis

In 'Architects of Networked Disinformation', Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Cabanes interviewed the protagonists of Philippines' disinformation architecture. At the top were **'chief architects'** of the system. They came from advertising and PR firms, lived in sleek apartments in the skyscrapers and described their work in an almost mythical way, comparing themselves to characters from Game of Thrones. They were proud they made it to the top of their profession from modest beginnings. They deny responsibility or commitment to the broader public by narrating a personal project of self-empowerment instead.

Below the architects came **'influencers',** online comedians who in between posting the latest jokes, made fun of opposing politicians for a fee. Below the influencers were the **community-level fake account operators**, with one person often manning dozens of social media personas. They could be someone who needed a little extra cash or campaign staff.

No one, at any level, in this business ever described their activity as trolling or producing 'fake news'. Everyone had their own denial strategies: the architects stressed it was merely a side hustle to their regular PR work and thus didn't define them; the community-level operators said someone else was leaving the really nasty, hateful comments. This was the architecture of online influence that shifted into a more aggressive gear and helped Rodrigo Duterte come to power.

Milking conspiracy to sow cynicism

One of the premises of democratisation was that a plural media based on free-market rules would help ensure democracy. But it was always a tenuous idea. Tycoons with special interests often own media in 'democracies', and autocrats such as Turkey's Erdogan or Hungary's Orban have perfected the art of hollowing them out from the inside.

Also, today's autocrats have learnt to speak with different tongues instead of hanging on to one single ideology, even while doing just what they want to do. Aleksandar Vucic from Serbia is similarly adept at getting newspapers to publish conspiracy theories that say the country, or his life is at risk from some hidden foreign hand.

Conspiracy theories have long been used to maintain power: the Soviet leadership saw capitalist and counter-revolutionary conspiracies everywhere; the Nazis, Jewish ones. But earlier, those conspiracies were ultimately there to buttress a favoured ideology, whether it was class warfare for Communists, or race for Nazis. With today's regimes, which struggle to formulate a single ideology – indeed, which can't if they want to maintain power by sending different messages to different people – the idea that one lives in a world full of conspiracies becomes the world view itself. Conspiracy does not support the ideology; it replaces it.

As a world view, it grants those who subscribe to it certain pleasures: if all the world is a conspiracy, then your own failures are no longer all your fault. The fact that you achieved less than you hoped for, that your life is a mess – it's all the fault of the conspiracy.

More importantly, conspiracy is a way to maintain control. In a world where even the most authoritarian regimes struggle to impose censorship, one has to surround audiences with so much cynicism about anybody's motives, persuade them that behind every seemingly benign motivation is a nefarious, if impossible-to-prove, plot, that they lose faith in the possibility of an alternative.

And the end effect of this endless pile-up of conspiracies is that you, the little guy, can never change anything. For if you are living in a world where shadowy forces control everything, then what possible chance do you have of turning it around? In this murk it becomes best to rely on a **strong hand** to guide you.

It starts with comedy

Trump, Putin, Bolsonaro, Duterte et al are known for coarseness of language. Duterte for example called the Pope and US presidents sons of whores; bragged about having two mistresses; joked about how a good-looking hostage should have been raped by him when he was mayor, instead of by her kidnappers. On TV, Duterte said he wanted to eat the livers of terrorists and season them with salt; that if his troops raped three women each, he would take the rape sentences for them.

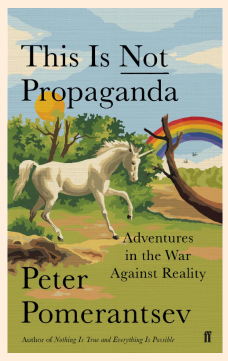
How could a country's president get away with saying such things?

The linguistic context behind such statements can be understood in the country's comedy culture. In the Philippines, the comedians on TV shows would pick out victims in the audience and roast them, taunting them about the size of their penises or their weight – all this right in front of entire families, who all laugh along at their relatives' humiliation.

This is the language Duterte partially taps into with his incessant stream of dirty jokes. It's a use of humour he shares with a troupe of male leaders across the world.

When dirty jokes are used by the the weak to poke fun at the powerful, they can bring authority figures back down to earth, give the sense that their rules can be suspended. That's why dirty jokes have often been suppressed.

But when such language is used consistently by men of real power to degrade those who are weaker, this humour grows into something menacing: it lays the linguistic path to humiliating victims in other ways as well, to a space where all norms disappear.



About the book:
This is Not Propaganda
by Peter Pomerantsev
Faber & Faber 2019

Why facts are being shrugged off

During glasnost, it seemed like the truth would set everybody free. Dictators appeared so afraid of the truth they had it suppressed. But something drastic has gone wrong. We have access to more information and evidence than ever, but facts seem to have lost their power. There is nothing new in politicians lying, but what seems novel is that they seem to be making a thing out of showing that they don't care about whether they tell the truth or not.

Why has this happened? Is technology to blame? The media? And what are the consequences in a world where the powerful are no longer afraid of facts? Does that mean one can commit crimes in full view of all? And then just shrug them off?